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AUTHOR Hassel, Holly; Epp, Dawn Vernooy
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ABSTRACT

In the 1996 book "Generation X Goes to College: An Eye-Opening Account of Teaching in Post-Modern America," Peter Sacks probes the "decay" of higher education in the United States; a decay he attributes to listless, entitled students. This paper interrogates the paradigm of Boomers and Generation Xers poised in opposition to one another, classifying Boomers as teachers and Gen Xers as students--while simultaneously dismissing the very paradigm the author/educators want to understand and perpetuate--multiculturalism. The paper proposes to use generational identity in the classroom to resemble what Mary Louise Pratt has called a "contact zone." Its larger exploration of this contact zone is three-fold: first, to illuminate the current scholarly conversations that validate Generation X as a rhetorical marker and contribute to that conversation; second, to investigate ways to break down the authority-granting hierarchy that gives power to older generations while taking it away from younger ones within the academy generally and within the writing classroom specifically; and third, to generate pedagogical strategies that begin to enact the breakdown of age-based hierarchies. The paper focuses on one text that both responds to generationally-based hierarchies of authority and examines the relationships between Boomers and Xers rhetorical authority: Douglas Coupland's novel "Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture." It also discusses ways in which this text could be used as a model for students' and teachers' thinking and writing about the construction of generational identity, relationships between generations, and personal rhetorical authority. (NKA)

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Holly Hassel and Dawn Vernooy Epp

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Introduction

In his 1996 book, Generation X Goes To College: An Eye-Opening Account of Teaching in Post-Modern America Peter Sacks vents his outrage with students of Generation X. Formerly a journalist, Sacks reassumes the role of undercover writer in order to probe the decay of higher education in the U. S., a decay he attributes to listless, entitled students. Sacks characterizes the state of university life as a cultural war, explaining: **[quote]**

> I'm not referring to clashes between races, sexes, or people of different religious beliefs. I'm talking about something perhaps more fundamental than these often-discussed conflicts of multiculturalism; I'm talking about a culture war between generations, and race and gender don't matter in this war. The culture war I discovered was between college teachers, typically Baby Boomers like me or older, and members of Generation X. (xii) **[end quote]**

This excerpt is especially relevant for our work because it introduces the paradigm that we want to interrogate—Boomers and Gen Xers poised in opposition to one another classifying Boomers as teachers and Gen Xers as students—while simultaneously

CS 510 803

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dismissing the very paradigm that we want to understand and perpetuate—multiculturalism. Sacks' identification of the generation gap as the pivot on which teacher-student relationships revolve erases all kinds of difference other than age, oversimplifying the complex dynamics that shape this relationship.

While Generation X Goes to College was published only six years ago, some of the students with whom Sacks was so disappointed are now teachers themselves. Nineteen ninety-six was the moment in fact that marked both Holly's and my transition from undergraduate to graduate education, and in Holly's case, the transition from behind the desk to behind the podium. We belonged to the same cohort of students in Sacks' book, and now we find ourselves no longer the "Generation X that goes to college," but rather "the Generation X that teaches college." Sacks positioning of Generation X and Boomers within academia allows no opportunity for imagining Generation X within the structures of academic authority. Even recent articles such as Mark Singer's "Teaching the MTV Learner," from last month's issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, reinforces Sacks' conception of Generation X as problem students needing to be taught rather than teachers themselves.

However, instead of seeing generation as a divisive characteristic, a barrier separating the students from the teachers, as Sacks and others do, we propose to use generational identity in the classroom to resemble what Mary Louise Pratt has called a "contact zone." By seeing dialogue about generational identity in this way, teacher-scholars and students of writing can find a toehold into critical thinking and discussion about difference. Our larger exploration of this "contact zone" is three-fold: first, we illuminate the current scholarly conversations that validate Generation X as a rhetorical

marker and contribute to that conversation; second, we investigate ways to break down the authority-granting hierarchy that gives power to older generations while taking it away from younger ones within the academy generally and within the writing classroom specifically; and third, we generate pedagogical strategies that begin to enact the breakdown of age-based hierarchies. In our talk today, we will focus on one text that both responds to generationally-based hierarchies of authority and examines the relationships between Boomers and Xers to grant Xers rhetorical authority: Douglas Coupland's novel Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture. And secondly, we will discuss ways in which this text could be used as a model for our students' and our own thinking and writing about the construction of generational identity, relationships between generations, and our own rhetorical authority.

Origins and Meanings: Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture as Autoethnographic Text

While Sacks' book prompted our inquiry into generational identity as a site of scholarly study, a rhetorical construction, and a pedagogical device, other recent publications have furthered our thinking about this subject (see our handout for a list of these articles). Clearly, how to teach this generation of students is of interest to the discipline and to academia broadly. We take as a point of entrance into this pedagogical dilemma Mary Louise Pratt's influential article, "Arts of the Contact Zone." Pratt defines the "contact zone" as **[quote]** "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as

colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (34). We believe this definition describes the often hostile relationship between generations and speaks to rhetorical attitudes toward the current generation of students that scholarship documents. This construction of a younger generation by an older one is addressed by novelist Douglas Coupland, whose Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture describes—although in the ironic and cynical tone that has come to be associated with Generation X—the same sort of "culture war" Sacks proposes. Coupland peppers his novel with a marginal "lexicon," or neologisms he coins to capture the rhetorical and cultural tenor of this new generation, broadly identified as having been born anywhere from 1961 to as late as 1984. Coupland's term, "Clique Maintenance," which he defines as **[quote]** "the need of one generation to see the generation following it as deficient so as to bolster its own collective ego: '*Kids today do nothing. They're so apathetic. We used to go out and protest. All they do is shop and complain*" (21) humorously echoes Sacks' gripe. Coupland's definition caricatures Sacks' model of today's youth as apathetic and exasperating slackers, by emphasizing Boomers' struggle to maintain rhetorical and professional authority over the lethargy and resistance of the Gen X student.

This hostility appears in much of the scholarship on teaching what many refer to as a "new breed" of student, such as Singer's "Teaching the MTV Learner," which sketches the Gen X student as having a poor attitude, as "'channel surfing' for something more interesting within minutes, or even seconds, of the beginning of a typical college class" (Singer). Singer's attitude is not singular; echoed by Sacks, and by others like Joel Snell in his article "Teaching Gen X and Y: an Essay Part 2: Teaching Strategies," when he remarks, "for those who find this generation disengaged with even your most exciting

presentations, I would like to suggest the following. In terms of the media, you are another 'talking head'" (482). Snell constructs his audience in opposition to or at the very least *different* from the students about whom he writes. Generation X is roundly accused of being academically, intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically different from—and usually inferior to—previous generations of students.

We find then that Coupland's novel, the book that spawned the term's common cultural designation, can function as what Pratt calls an "autoethnographic text," a **[quote]** "text which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them" (35). The autoethnographic text, for Pratt, is a way of subverting the asymmetrical power relationship that characterizes the contact zone, and Coupland's book can function as exactly that kind of document within the "culture wars" between generations. Coupland's book, while a fictional work, attempts to engage with "Boomer" images of Generation X and deflate those cultural representations manufactured by non Gen-X sources. The book's characters, Dag, Andrew, and Claire, do embody some of the descriptors that have been popularly ascribed to Generation X: listless, info-laden, restless and disaffected, self-conscious, jaded. Nonetheless, they reject some of the less-flattering language that has been applied to Gen X: exasperating, consumerist, media-saturated, self-involved, shallow, disinterested in intellect and engaging with the outside world. In order to establish Coupland's book as an autoethnographic text, we find it useful, therefore, to examine the characterization Coupland offers of his Gen Xer protagonists.

For Coupland, Generation Xers are defined by an ironic detachment from the goings-on around them and by a generalized ennui fostered by broken generational promises. The novel's narrator, Andrew, muses: **[quote]**

> I shiver and pull the blanket tight around myself, for I am colder than I had realized, and I wonder that all things seem to be from hell these days: dates, jobs, parties, weather….Could the situation be that we no longer believe in that particular place? Or maybe we were all promised heaven in our lifetimes, and what we ended up with can't help but suffer in comparison. (7)

Coupland's narrator does not specify who it was that promised his age group heaven in this particular passage, but what this excerpt does touch on is the "culture war" that Sacks has described, but it is less of an all-out frontal attack on the preceding generation, the Boomers. Coupland's subtle critique acts more as a resigned disappointment with what Andrew and subsequently, Gen X, sees as a failure of the generation before his to live up to the vector of progress that the twentieth-century foreshadowed. Later, Coupland's narrator articulates the dilemma of the displaced Gen Xer:

> The phone is no friend; Portland is Deadsville at the moment. My friends are all either married, boring, and depressed; single, bored, and depressed; or moved out of town to avoid boredom and depression. And some of them have bought houses, which has to be the kiss of death, personality-wise. When someone tells you they've just bought a house, they might as well tell you they no longer have a personality. You can immediately assume so many things; that they're locked into jobs they hate; that they're broke; that they spend every night watching

> videos; that they're fifteen pounds overweight; that they no longer listen to new ideas. It's profoundly depressing. (143)

Coupland's original conception of Generation X was not of a spoiled cadre of consumerists but rather a generation profoundly troubled by the bourgeois aspirations of the generation that preceded it, whose lives are made meaningless by the scrabbling for material goods, and who find no rewards in the American capitalist project. Rather than participating in market culture, Coupland and his characters endorse is meaning-making through story-telling, a mechanism that offers provocative grounds for classroom intervention. The narrating-to-understand that Dag, Andrew, and Claire engage in reminds us of Peter Elbow's reflections on his expressivist pedagogies in the 1995 College English article "Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict in Goals." In it, he articulates two contradictory writing goals he has for his students: asking them to both become a part of a conversation about the subject they write about, and seeing themselves as writers, that is, encouraging them to find purchase in the slippery world of language by becoming rhetorical authorities.

By writing about generational construction, students take on the authority of their generation, an allegiance borne in defensiveness at the aspersions being cast upon it by media representations as well as the inaccuracies of pop culture imagery, students can, as Elbow states, "write with more authority than their readers." At the same time, as our discussion of pedagogical strategies will further illuminate, their writing does enter into the ongoing intellectual conversation of generation construction. Discussions of Coupland's novel as an autoethnographic text can provide a model to which students can

aspire: a model of generation X as a more self-conscious and self-aware, reflexive generation.

Coupland's characters make sense of their lives by telling each other stories that either recapture, revisit, or describe through metaphor their experiences. Through this cogent practice, Coupland's novel might enable this self-consciousness and reflexivity. Through story-telling, Coupland allows the reader access to the meaning-making in which the characters engage. Instead of passively experiencing their lives, Dag, Andrew, and Claire actively make sense of them. For example, after the narrator describes a particularly resonant moment of perceiving the natural world, the narrator reveals the significance of storytelling:

> The carapace of coolness is too much for Claire, also. She breaks the silence by saying that it's not healthy to live as a succession of isolated little cool moments. "Either our lives become stories, or there's just no way to get through them."
>
> I agree. Dag agrees. We know that this is why the three of us left our lives behind us and came to the desert—to tell stories and to make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process" (8).

Here, Andrew voices the non clichéd vision of Gen X—the moment of discovery and agency that speaks to the novel's utility as an autoethnographic text. Claire's response to Andrew's comment echoes Pratt when she states that only stories we tell about ourselves lend meaning to our lives.

Rhetorical and Pedagogical Positions of Authority

One question we hoped to answer in this project was "How do we as members of Gen X, locate ourselves as professionals in the writing classroom in the face of negative cultural attitudes toward "Generation X"? Just as Coupland's text engages with the hegemonic generation and invites readers to view his generation through his own eyes, by writing this paper and sharing our work publicly, we would argue that we assume a position of authority. Since most of the work that has been done in characterizing generation X rhetorically, culturally, and aesthetically appears to be written by non Gen X-ers, or at least writers who position themselves as such, we endeavor by publicly engaging in scholarship that enters into dialogue with those voices, to fashion authority for our "generation," however refracted.

Similarly, we believe that by having our students engage—or start to model—responses to what other people are saying about their own generation, they can dismantle assumed definitions by writing their own autoethnographic texts. In doing so, our students are acting, and becoming part of the larger conversation on generations and identity construction. These pedagogical processes simultaneously grant us power in the classroom by naming and identifying generational hierarchies and grant our students rhetorical power over constructing their own identities. Reading the text as a cultural document and a model of reflective generational construction, as the excerpts demonstrate, we offer students a rhetorical model for producing their own autoethnographic texts. These texts have the potential to challenge established iconography of their generation and invite students to respond actively rather than passively to those characterizations that irk them.

Generation X in the Classroom

For the next part of our talk, we want to discuss how Coupland's novel could be used as a text in a first-year composition course and as the basis for class conversations and writing projects that would use generational identity as a contact zone. This interrogation of generational identity would develop in several stages that would include reading Coupland's novel, writing a response journal, two to three days of class discussion, a small writing assignment in the form of a rhetorical analysis, and a longer writing project in which students would produce their own autoethnographic texts. [We've outlined these projects on the handout if you want to follow along.] These assignments would invite students to think about generational identity not as a predetermined role that governs the lifestyle choices of a certain age group but rather as a rhetorical construction shaped by media, popular culture, and even visual arts and literature.

One of the ways to unpack the construction of generational identity is to analyze how Coupland defines the two main generations of characters in the novel: Baby Boomers and Generation X. As students read, they would keep a journal, recording the traits of Boomer and Gen X characters. Further class discussion might entail compiling a collective list from their journals and then exploring the categories and strategies that Coupland used in order to construct the identities of these two generations. As a class, we would find that he described the clothing, interpersonal relationship behaviors, language, habitat, spending habits, and leisure activities. From there, we could talk about

how these conceptions emerged about Boomers and Xers behavior and lifestyle choices. Did Coupland's portrayal ring true? Are these generational traits specific to Coupland's book or are they located in other cultural documents as well? This might move the class discussion toward other types of media that also inform the construction of generational identities—books, music, movies, advertisements, etc.

In subsequent class periods, we would ask students to bring in examples of these media—film clips, ads, music, books, and explore why they seem to define a generation. Examining these media would prompt students to consider what other kinds of cultural phenomena have fashioned these generational identities, for instance, scientific discovery, current events, national tragedies, etc. could be fruitful topics of discussion. For the last segment of class discussion, we would focus on why there is a compulsion to define generations.

Using Coupland's book as a springboard, this dialogue would then prepare students for a small writing assignment in which they would move from looking at the characterizations of Bommers and Xers to how Coupland communicated icons and images that defined them. Students would write a short, 1-2 page rhetorical analysis where they discuss how conveys that members of Generation X were listless, sarcastic, disaffected, cynical, etc. Some of the features of the book we would want to draw students' attention to are his cartoons, story-telling, lexicon-creation, and similes and metaphors that create a sense of displacement illustrated in the excerpts we've discussed today.

Then, for the final writing project, students would craft their own autoethnographic text constructing their own generational identity. These texts could

resemble one of Coupland's chapters, using his rhetorical strategies of imagery, simile, metaphor, neölogisms, visual media, anecdotes, or allegories, inviting them to use other strategies they deem effective.

E. Conclusion

Generational conflicts certainly did not begin with the birth of Generation X. Moreover, the practice of an older generation infantilizing a younger one just when they begin to enter professional and academic arenas did not begin in 1996 with Sacks' book. In fact, John Milton, identified by some as the icon of the establishment, was for the Romantics the model of a young rebel, responding to and attempting to subvert the older generation of politicians and intellectuals. When Milton published Aereopagitica in 1644, subtitled A Speech . . .For the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing, he advocated the interrogation of the practices, beliefs, and lifestyles of the older generation by the younger. He imagined the spirit of the new generation "as an eagle musing her mighty youth, and kindling her undazzled eyes at the full midday beam" and the older generation as "those that love the twilight . . . amazed at what [the eagle] means . . .speaking envious gabble." This envious gabble could be read as a seventeenth century precursor to Coupland's fictional portrayal of Boomer's struggle to maintain their own professional and rhetorical authority four hundred years later.

As teachers, it is our responsibility not to participate in the envious gabble and instead to encourage the potential spark of intellectual curiosity in our students. Rather than thinking about age difference as a culture war or an insurmountable gap, we should revision it as a contact zone., a place to explore difference and endeavor to understand it.

It is by teaching our students how to gain their own rhetorical and professional authority that we maintain and share our own.

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